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SUBJECT: IN RUN-UP TO ELECTIONS NORTH BENGAL IS EAGER FOR
CHANGE

Classified By: Ambassador James F. Moriarty for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

¶1. (SBU) Voters in North Bengal are eager for change, but are not united on the type of change they want. In the run-up to Bangladesh's parliamentary elections December 29, parliamentary candidates, businessmen, educators and civil society leaders in three districts of Rajshahi Division revealed a diversity of political views. Voters' ethnic or religious backgrounds appeared to heavily influence their opinions, as did their regional association with certain candidates. Economic concerns, such as infrastructure development, poverty alleviation, energy production and trade with India also loomed large. Most voters appeared disillusioned with the Caretaker Government, allowing the Bangladesh Nationalist Party to run on an anti-incumbent platform, despite having been in office 2001-2006.

Bangladesh's Northwest Frontier

¶2. (U) The northern half of Rajshahi Division, an area historically known as North Bengal, is almost completely surrounded by India, and its geography has played an important part in its history and cultural makeup. It has a large Hindu population, approaching 50 percent in some western areas, and it experienced heavy fighting during the 1971 Liberation War when the Indian Army entered Bangladesh to support the freedom fighters. It is an area of rich agricultural production and coal resources, but its isolation from the rest of Bangladesh and restrictions on trade with India at its border posts have worked to its economic disadvantage.

¶3. (SBU) On a visit to the area December 10-14, Pol-Econoff detected distinctly different perspectives in the two main cities of Dinajpur and Rangpur. Dinajpur and nearby villages, with their large Hindu populations, seemed to favor the secular stance of the Awami League (AL), even though the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) won more seats there in ¶2001. Rangpur politics appeared to be more personality-based, dominated by the powerful presence of former President Ershad.

Secular Dinajpur Leans Awami

¶4. (SBU) In Dinajpur District, Pol-Econoff interviewed two pairs of AL-BNP rivals, one pair in the city itself and the other in the outlying village of Sitabganj. Both AL candidates spoke at length about local concerns, barely mentioning party leader Sheikh Hasina, while the BNP candidates focused on national politics and party leader Khaleda Zia. A discussion with a group of teachers and journalists revealed their overwhelming support for a secular government. Eager to vote, they worried about possible violence when the state of emergency was lifted, some even suggesting emergency rule should continue through the election to ensure security. They admired the caretaker

government's attempts to address corruption and to raise public awareness of the problem, but were disappointed by the recent release from prison of former officials charged with corruption. They wondered whether the caretaker government's reforms had staying power. A retired barrister and human rights activist in Dinajpur reported widespread harassment of minorities by law enforcement officials in recent years, for which he blamed BNP politicians. A well-educated and respected Hindu teacher in Sitabganj claimed Hindus and Adivashis (indigenous people) in his community enjoyed a good relationship with Muslims. He also said he had never known of a Hindu in his community voting BNP.

15. (C) In the 2001 election, the AL won only one of Dinajpur's six seats, compared to the BNP's three. Even Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), the country's main Islamic party, won two seats, including one in the Dinajpur-1 constituency, one of the district's most heavily Hindu areas. AL candidates conceded there had been disunity in their party at the time but alleged the real reason for their party's failure was widespread vote fraud and intimidation of AL supporters by the BNP. According to one, the election officer in Dinajpur-1 merely switched the data on the two candidates, explaining JI's victory there. Non-political figures echoed these allegations, indicating a widespread belief the BNP had manipulated the last election. Many allegations focused on BNP candidate and former Chief of Army Staff Mahbubur Rahman, (who won the Sitabganj seat in 2001). Rahman's current AL rival alleged the former officer had used his military connections to prevent AL supporters from voting in 2001, a charge Rahman vehemently denied. When asked about the Hindu vote, Rahman told Pol-Econoff he enjoyed substantial support

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from Hindus, asserting he even took some flack from Muslims for it. He also pointed out that Khaleda Zia had family ties to the region, (Zia's sister, now deceased, won a Dinajpur seat in 2001), adding to the BNP's favor.

Ershad: Rangpur's Favorite Son

16. (C) Former President H.M. Ershad, who heads the Jatiya Party-Ershad (JP-E), hails from Rangpur and is a candidate in its largest constituency. JP-E's District Secretary expressed confidence the party would win throughout the district. (NOTE: candidates in other Rangpur constituencies, representing BNP and JI, told Pol-Econoff they had a good chance of winning against their JP-E rivals. END NOTE) One BNP candidate said educated people had no reason to vote for JP-E, as Ershad was clearly interested only in his own success over that of the party, citing as the evidence the number of veteran JP-E figures Ershad had passed over for candidacies in favor of wealthier novices. A JI candidate cited his party's unclouded view and its sense of honesty and service as factors that would win voters over, even non-Muslim ones. His JP-E rival, a nephew of Ershad, is widely believed to be a drug addict. The JI candidate stated his party did not have sectarian interests and he denied any links to Jamaat-al-Mujahiddin Bangladesh (JMB), a militant Islamic group. Local journalists however, asserted JI in Rangpur was intimately linked to JMB, and a student leader at nearby Carmichael College told us JI's student wing was involved in widespread intimidation and occasional violence on campus. Independent voices in Rangpur told Pol-Econoff they expected JP-E to win most of Rangpur District's seats. They warned, however, that the party would collapse as soon as Ershad retired, as its popularity was based solely on his persona.

Saidpur Biharis Ready to Vote

17. (U) Half way between Dinajpur and Rangpur, the town of Saidpur has a sizeable population of Urdu-speaking Bihari Muslims. They migrated from Bihar and other parts of eastern India at the time of the partition of India in 1947, along with hundreds of thousands of others now scattered around

Bangladesh. Loyal to Pakistan during the 1971 Liberation War, Biharis suffered immense retribution from both the liberation supporters and the Indian Army. Today, many Biharis, including the chairman of Saidpur's leading trade association, live normal lives. A group of them told us they continued to suffer mild discrimination, but, in general, had comfortably assimilated to Bangladeshi culture. They said Biharis tend to vote BNP because of the AL's association with the liberation war, and recent BNP support for Bihari rehabilitation projects.

18. (SBU) The situation was very different, however, for the hundreds of thousands of Biharis permanently driven from their homes in the chaos of the war. After the war, the GOB temporarily settled Baharis in refugee "camps", where they have been languishing ever since. Their status as Bangladeshi citizens was only recently resolved. For the first time, this year they registered to vote. There are twenty such camps in the Saidpur area, and we visited one near the town's railway yard. Conditions were extremely cramped, with almost no open space except for the narrow alleys running among the barracks-like dwellings. After a long and detailed recounting of their suffering in the war, a group of men listed their current difficulties. Initially they received some assistance from the International Red Cross and later from the Bangladesh Red Crescent, but they claimed to have received nothing for about the last ten years. There were no employment options in the camp, so inhabitants survived on whatever marginal opportunities existed outside. It was only recently that schools began to accept children from the camp. The camp-Biharis' biggest demand was for a permanent place to settle and rehabilitation services. They wanted to get out of the camp before passing their way of life to another generation. They were happy to have the chance to vote and told us they would likely vote BNP.

Sirajganj: "Swing State" Loses a Seat

19. (C) On the way back to Dhaka we visited Shahazadpur, a rural constituency in Sirajganj District. The district lost one seat in the recent re-districting. The loss was caused in part by the westward shift in the Jamuna River - a natural process exacerbated by man-made erosion problems, forcing displaced inhabitants to migrate westward. District-wide the BNP did well in 2001, while the AL took a majority in 1996. A local professor likened Sirajganj to a U.S. swing state. Pol-Econoff spoke to both the AL and BNP candidates, held a

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discussion with local college lecturers and met with a group of teachers, businessmen and party workers. Pocketbook issues - inflation and unemployment, dominated their concerns. A nearby state-run milk processing plant, Bangladesh's largest, had recently laid off a third of its workforce at the urging of the Caretaker Government. Like everywhere in Bangladesh, voters were deeply concerned about inflation. Many felt the vote would be close, but that the AL had an edge, as the locals associated secularism with communal harmony, thus favoring AL. They worried the BNP would attempt to manipulate the election in their area. Senior law enforcement authorities in Shahazadpur reportedly have close links to the BNP and JI, and the AL candidate told us several of his party workers had recently been arrested on petty charges.

Comment

110. (C) Throughout the trip we noted distinct differences in the way AL and BNP candidates presented themselves. All of the AL candidates chose to meet in secluded settings with just a few others present, and they generally stayed focused on the questions posed, providing a thorough analysis of the local situation and perspective. In contrast, all but one of the BNP candidates held their meetings in front of large groups of party supporters, sometimes with as many as forty

people squeezed into a small room. They frequently drifted away from local issues, choosing instead to focus on the national platform. To some degree, this reflects the stature of Khaleda Zia within the party. Just as important, the BNP appears to have decided to turn this election into a referendum on the caretaker government period.

MORIARTY